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WASHINGTON -- Sen. Gordon Smith, the Oregon Republican with the starched white collars and the pocket kerchiefs, is someone President Bush typically can count on.

But come July, Smith will break with the president to vote for legislation lifting White House-imposed restrictions on federally funded embryonic stem cell research.

His decision, like that of many other members of Congress, is grounded in personal experience. His mother, Jessica Udall Smith, came from a famous political family with a long history of Parkinson's disease, the debilitating brain disorder.

"Obviously, watching your uncle and your grandmother and your cousin, [former Rep.] Morris Udall, die of Parkinson's leaves a powerful impression on one, and your heart opens to looking for cures," said Smith, who is a longtime opponent of abortion.

With the Senate expected to take up the stem cell question next month, many lawmakers are looking through an intimately personal lens as they consider their vote.

"I have no doubt in my mind that because so many people have family members and close friends who have suffered one of these illnesses or accidents or diseases and are motivated to help find a cure or intervention, that this is really helping us to get a change in the stem cell policy," said Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa), whose nephew broke his neck while he was in the Navy and now is a paraplegic. "No doubt in my mind."

In May, after four hours of emotional debate, the House voted to undo Bush's 2001 strictures limiting federal funding for the research to existing embryonic stem cell lines. The Senate is expected to follow suit with as many as 60 votes for the legislation, proponents say.

The president has promised to use what may be his first veto to reject the measure. He and opponents of the research say that embryos, which are used to harvest stem cells, are human life and should not be destroyed. Bush's veto would effectively kill the legislation because there are not enough votes in the House to override it.

Multiple research targets

However, advocates believe their day will come, and soon. They say embryonic stem cell research could lead to advances and cures for more than 100 million Americans suffering from spinal cord injuries, cancer, diabetes, Parkinson's, Alzheimer's and heart disease, among other conditions.

And most members of Congress know someone--a family member, friend or constituent--struggling with one of those illnesses. That connection has added fuel to the debate, pushing the legislation along on an unusually fast track.

In some cases, the person with the most to gain is the congressman or senator. For example, Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) is battling Hodgkin's disease, which is cancer of the lymph system.

"It is scandalous, absolutely scandalous, that there are so many people with Alzheimer's and Parkinson's and heart disease and cancer--some of whom, myself, look in the mirror every day, can barely recognize myself," said Specter, who has lost most of his hair from chemotherapy. "And not to have the availability of the best in medical care is simply atrocious."

In the House, Rep. Lane Evans (D-Ill.) has been dealing with the effects of Parkinson's disease since 1995. And he has been meeting with colleagues to urge them to support stem cell research, including those concerned that embryos constitute life.

"There's a right to live as well as a right to life," said Evans, whose speech is thick because of his disease. He describes his health as "off and on" and hopes for a treatment that will improve not only his condition but that of others.

Those emotional pleas are not always easy to deal with for the lawmakers opposed to embryonic stem cell research who meet with sick constituents advocating it.

"The scientific community makes the promise of things we don't know, and if you're someone in a desperate situation with a family member who is very sick, you grab onto it," said Sen. Rick Santorum (R-Pa.).

Santorum said he has long supported medical research but that it must occur within an ethical framework. And destruction of human life for research purposes, he said, is unethical.

"The scientific community has a long history of using sympathetic cases to make arguments for unethical scientific research," Santorum said.

Sen. Sam Brownback (R-Kan.) said that when he meets with people who are ill and pushing him to support embryonic stem cell research, he focuses on trying to find them medical help, putting them in touch with doctors and scientists doing work with stem cells from adults and umbilical cord blood.

Preserving life is goal

"We're trying to offer real cures, and you're not killing human beings to do it," Brownback said.

Other lawmakers have found their sessions with constituents to be so persuasive that they have signed onto the effort to push for expanded embryonic stem cell research.

For Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-Utah), the turning point came in 2001 when he met with Cody Anderson from West Jordan, Utah. Cody has juvenile diabetes, just like his grandfather, who died at the age of 47

"Cody was 4 years old. Articulate, cute and courageous, he is a remarkable young man," Hatch wrote in his book "Square Peg: Confessions of a Citizen Senator."

In an interview, Hatch, who opposes abortion, said his decision to support the research was not a difficult one.

"Why wouldn't we do everything in our power to help that little boy?" he asked.

Personal connections have long been known to provide momentum to a legislative effort. In 1990, Congress passed the Americans with Disabilities Act to prohibit discrimination against people with disabilities.

Leading the way were then-Senate Minority Leader Bob Dole (R-Kan.), who was permanently disabled in World War II, and Harkin, whose brother was deaf.

With passage of the stem cell legislation considered likely, advocates now are training their efforts on Bush, hoping to persuade him to reverse his policy.

Bush meeting suggested

Rep. James Langevin (D-R.I.), who was paralyzed at age 16 after a police officer's gun accidentally discharged and severed his spinal cord, wrote to Bush requesting a meeting.

Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.), a leader of the effort in the House, said he and other advocates are hoping to arrange a private lunch between the president and former First Lady Nancy Reagan, whose husband had Alzheimer's disease toward the end of his life. She has played a major role behind the scenes, urging members of Congress to support the expansion of embryonic stem cell research.

Smith, the Oregon senator, said the time spent waiting for the research to move forward is critical to people like his brother-in-law, Dan Daniels, who has Parkinson's.

"The longer we withhold federal involvement, perhaps the longer a cure is delayed," Smith said.